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Spring Greens

by Jackie Andre

Home Economics Junior

MAYBE YOUR GRANDMOTHER couldn't tell riboflavin from rick-rack but when it came to gathering spring greens to be used in salads and vegetable dishes she was well informed. With straw basket in hand, she could identify and gather those little bits of greens that would add just the right flavor to tempting dishes or make a dish in themselves.

Even today we can get a little bit of the pioneering spirit with the help of a guidebook on spring greens. Just as your grandmothers gathered greens, you can make use of these plain, old weeds that cause distress

to the gardener and transform them into costless and tantalizing dishes for your spring menus. These spring greens can be substituted for the old regulars and brought to the table crisp and chilled or piping hot.

The common dandelion and nettles, well-known for their stinging characteristics, are among the naturally growing plants that can be gathered for the dinner table. It is best to pick these plants in the spring while they are still young and tender, for one tough leaf or sprout can ruin the entire serving. Of course a guidebook is a welcome extra in your gathering basket, especially in the spring when there are no distinguishing fruits or flowers on most of the greens.

In preparing the young leaves and sprouts wash carefully as you would other vegetables. Just as the vegetables you regularly serve are either mild or strong flavored, some greens have a mild and harmless flavor, while others are strong, bitter, and poisonous. Even though much of the nutritive value will be lost, these strong varieties should be boiled several times in fresh water.

After preparation you can "dress up" your greens by adding salt pork, buttered crumbs, beaten eggs or milk. Coarser leaves may be chopped and flavored with a butter and oil topping. Sliced boiled eggs make good garnishes.

Included in the mild greens common to Iowa are nettles, dock, pigweed, and mustard.

Nettles have leaf stalks and lower surfaces covered with bristles. They are found along roadsides and in thickets. In preparing, be careful not to get "stung" by the nettles.

You can identify dock by its basal leaves and the papery membrane where the leaves attach to the stem. Found frequently in fields, it is unique because no bulk is lost in cooking so you need not gather a large amount for your vegetable dish.

Pigweed is probably one of the "menaces" in your

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own garden, but mixed with other greens it makes a delightful dish. It is a white and mealy plant with alternate, long-stalked leaves. Pigweed and dock go well together since pigweed loses much of its bulk during cooking.

Mustard, related to the powdered variety in your spice cabinet, has many family members. Onion-like penny cress is a member of this family, as is pepper grass, which has oblong, pale leaves and is found along roadsides.

The common strong flavored greens in the Midwest are wild onions, pokeweed, wintercress, milkweed, and of course, the dandelion.

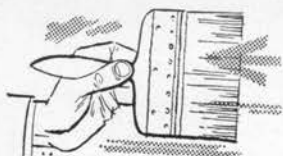
You shouldn't have much trouble identifying wild onions, as they have a characteristic onion odor and small bulbs at the top of the shoots. The wild onion is good for pickling as well as mixing with other greens.

Substitute the shoots of the pokeweed for asparagus and its leaves for spinach. This plant is tall and has large, alternate-pointed leaves. With maturity the stems become purple. Pokeweed grows in rich, open soil or in recent clearings.

Wintercress, which has bright green rounded leaves, is so named because it remains green even in the winter. It grows on low ground or near streams.

Milkweed, characterized by a milky juice, you must identify carefully as there are some poisonous plants which secrete a similar milky fluid. In cooking, remove the "wool." The leaves taste like spinach and the pods, if they are round and firm, can be cooked and used like okra.

Probably the most common spring green is the dandelion which you can't miss even in the early spring because of its characteristic yellow flowers. In preparing dandelions cover the leaves with boiling water to begin the cooking.



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